IN ART

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The Familiar and the Grotesque: The Roots of Monster-Making in a Mexican Indian Village

This article describes how the growth in manufacture of grotesque ceramic devil and monster figures to satisfy a burgeoning tourist trade has disturbed local folk beliefs. According to popular religious superstition, devilish creatures are thought to inhabit the village, and some villagers fear that increased production of the ceramic figures might increase the influence of evil forces in the village. The conflict is seen in the context of the effect one culture can have on the folk crafts, and hence on the folk beliefs, of another.

Within the past ten years the little village of Ocumicho, Michoacán, Mexico, has become famous outside its Tarascan Indian area, but rather infamous within it, because of a change in the folk art produced there.[1] For several generations past, Ocumicho was well known only within its marketing area for the small ceramic toys and whistles which its women made on a part-time basis. Recently, however, the small-scale production of toys for Tarascan children has been overshadowed by the making of grotesque ceramic devil and monster figures, which were instantly popular with folk art collectors and tourists and have appeared at exclusive galleries in San Francisco, Paris, and Tokyo and even in the pages of the *National Geographic*.[2] This enthusiasm for the new figures is not shared by the Tarascans who comprise the traditional market. They find the new figures disgusting and repulsive, not because they are grotesque, but because they are frighteningly real. In this paper I will explain the cultural context within which the people of Ocumicho find inspiration for devil and monster figures and why in cultural context they are both familiar and grotesque, at once less odd and more terrifying to their creators than to the tourists who buy them.

THE FAMILIAR

Devils and monsters walk the streets of Ocumicho. They live in the

malpaís ("the bad land") on the edge of the village, in hollow trees, in caves in the mountains, and in the nearby volcano Parícutin. The villagers live uneasily with this presence. They believe that the close of the millenium will bring the end of the world; Satan has been bound in chains by Christ for the last thousand years, but with the end of the century he will break free to join his minions, the vast array of minor devils now walking the earth who bring destruction to man and drag his soul off to hell. Living uncertainly in this fear, the villagers avoid even the mention of the Devil's name least he be unwittingly called up.

As noted by Carrasco, Tarascan folklore and religious concepts are dominated by the ideas of good and evil.[3] God and the saints are good, the Devil and his demons evil, and everything is identified with one or the other. God lives in heaven with the saints, but the Devil and his demons live in hell, under the earth, and in "ugly" places like caves, hollow trees, ravines, and volcanoes. Harmful and violent forces of nature are considered bad and so are related to the Devil:

> They are either caused by him or are special representations of him. Thus the tornado is a water snake, a devilish creature in itself. When the devil wants to take someone away, he does so in this form. Similarly a whirlwind is a lame devil. . . . The volcano was made by the devil, as something bad which only he can do, even if following orders from God. When the volcano is personified it is the same as the devil.[4]

In Ocumicho, people believe that the nearby volcano Parícutin which grew out of a peasant's field in 1943 was a sign from God that hell really exists, and that if you go up to the crater you can actually see devils down below working and throwing rocks around. The denizens of "ugly" places are also identified with the demonic, especially snakes and lizards, for as one villager said, "Devils dominate snakes as men dominate cattle."

Because the souls of the wicked go to the Devil, his demons walk the earth provoking the bad behaviour needed to win more souls. They are always found among drunks, for example, persuading them to drink more and causing them to fight so they will lose their souls. Devils appear in many forms, often disguised as humans or animals, but with incongruous features. One may notice that a drinking man has goat's feet or a seducing woman has hairy hands. One of the villagers told me that the morning after a drunk was murdered, a dog was found eating his body.

> He ate all of the side of his face. We were looking at the dog and

> finally when we saw his feet, they were like the feet of a chicken. . . . We were just looking at the shape, which was of a dog, but below he had the feet of a chicken! Well, clearly he was no dog! He was a devil! He left when we saw the feet. . . he just disappeared. . . there are devils everywhere. I believe there are devils everywhere.

In Ocumicho, to talk of devils and monsters is to use two terms for the same thing. The Devil may appear in human form with horns and a tail, but any creature or natural phenomenon which deviates from the ordinary is of the Devil; there are no monsters apart from the idea of evil, symbolized by the Devil.

For the people of Ocumicho, seeing a devil, while not a common or mundane experience, is not the singular event that spotting a Sasquatch has become in Canada and the United States, where believing in Sasquatches is confined to a minority. The overwhelming majority of the villagers actively believe in the existence of devils and monsters; spotting them is not an extraordinary event, but it is a vision of evil and danger and is consequently a powerful experience.

Images of the Devil are constantly before the villagers. The *santos* ("religious pictures") in the shrines of their homes and churches portray the devil in his various aspects, from an allegorical monster representing the fiery jaws of hell to anthropomorphic devils with horns and pointed tails. His image is also frequently conjured up in the Bible as read in church and the Bible stories transmitted informally, as well as in the religious legendry of four hundred and fifty years of folk Catholicism. Costumed devil figures appear in the *pastorelas* ("nativity plays") presented at Christmas and the New Year, where the devil, brought to life by adolescent performers, is transformed into a comic trickster figure.

All reference to and portrayal of the Devil was done in a proper religious context; it was in this familiar context that the Devil, when made, was included among the figures of the toys and whistles which sold in local markets. The stock of figures produced was a fairly well-defined set of traditional forms, such as figures of horsemen, common animals, human figures from daily life and in costume from various festivals, and figures from folklore and folk religion. Devils made up only a minority of the figures produced.

THE GROTESQUE

In a recent radical departure from this tradition came a new production of grotesque devil and monster figures, far more varied and horribly explicit

than any previously produced in the village, which were intended for sale not in the local market but in the tourist trade. This development was essentially the product of one man, Marcelino Vicente Mulato, who died shortly after establishing it. He was, according to those who knew him, an extremely creative artist whose homosexual orientation steered him away from traditional "men's work" towards the "women's work" with clay. As opposed to the women's part-time involvement, he worked full time. Very shortly thereafter he began to depart from the confines of the traditional figures and create new ones drawn from his cultural stock and enriched with ideas from his imagination and dreams, dreams in which he actually saw devils who told him to stop fooling around and make figures of them as they actually were!

As his new style developed, the market changed, and for the first time large numbers of outsiders, folk art shops, museums, and tourists began to buy Ocumicho figures. In short order Marcelino found he could not keep up with the demand for his devils and had to enlist the help of the other figure makers. They were at first reluctant to join him because they were afraid to set loose those aspects of their culture which were controlled in their religious context. Miserable economic conditions, however, eventually overcame reluctance; soon the market was asking for not only more, but more grotesque figures. "Put on more snakes," they were told by the buyers, "the tourists like them with more snakes."

As it evolved, the new style of figure-making emphasized the break with the traditional style by its stress on a freer use of *memoria* ("imagination") on the part of the artisan to attract the attention of adults who comprise the new market. The figures also have to possess a certain quality defined as *chiste* ("to be striking or imaginative"). In producing them, sometimes a specific idea from a specific source may guide the artisans, but often, as they have told me, "I don't always know what I'm going to make. I just sit down and, little by little, there it is." The resultant figures, drawn from every demonic representation and situation from orthodox and folk Catholicism, legendry, the artisans' own personal encounters with the devil, their dreams, and their unconscious, reflect in symbolic terms the artisans' social and psychological states. While they are continuing many of the grotesque themes established by the innovator, they are also, because of the importance placed upon memoria and chiste, expanding the scope of the sins of their world as they see them, expressed figuratively as devils.

Revelations, perhaps the most popular section of the Bible in Ocumicho, provides a number of vivid devil and monster images which have been portrayed. Figures of seven-headed dragons which in folk belief represent the seven vices on earth were inspired by the beast ridden by the whore of Babylon.[5] Figures of Satan in chains stem from their belief in the imminent end of the world.[6] Figures from the "ugly" places and of the "ugly" animals

also loom large in the array of devil figures. Great lizards and monsters carry the souls of sinners, particularly drunks and *malcasados* ("adulterers and fornicators"), off to hell on their backs. Whirling cyclones ensnare sinners, now portrayed as devils themselves, and spirit them away. Snakes, special to devils and tourists, abound. Since most of these figures are made by women who do not work in the fields, harmful, and therefore demonic, creatures they have only heard about from men are transformed by their imaginations into terrible monster figures. A hog-faced snake feared for its bite, for example, was transformed into a dragon-like creature with teeth so large it could not possibly close its mouth. Violent crime provides further avenues for exploration. The murder of a drunk by his two drunken companions, transformed by an artisan into a grisly scene of monsters killing a devil, reflects the belief in the presence of devils among the drunks, dooming both the killers and the victim.

Creating devils and monsters for tourists is not done without taking a certain toll on the artisans involved. These creatures, although made for sale to tourists, are part of a real, vivid, and immediate reality for the villagers. The new style is sold only to outsiders because the local market of Tarascan Indians finds it repulsive; the concentration on demons is for them unnatural; their very explicitness, variation, and quantity is considered dangerous. Traditional reference to the Devil has always been indirect—"the evil one" (*noambákiti* in Tarascan) or "monkey" (*chango* in Spanish)—in order to avoid calling him up unwittingly; producing his image only invites trouble. Many people in villages surrounding Ocumicho fear it for its devil production; within Ocumicho those who do not make devil figures fear those who do, and many of the figure-makers themselves fear their own creations. They cover them up at night so they can walk by them without being frightened, and they dilute their production of demons with figures from folktales or their imagination. As one person told me, "They say here that the Devil will carry off to hell those who make devil figures. I too have a fear of making so many devils, but, well, it is necessary, so I mostly make moon and animal figures—only some, two or three, devils." The one mitigating factor in the production of demon figures is that they are quickly taken away and sold to tourists who do not know what they are, but are amused by them. In this way they are dispersed and their power diluted.

The ceramic figure production in Ocumicho, being a product of the artisans' memoria, can be seen as a mirror of their culture. The influence of the tourist market has made this a fun-house mirror, distorting the proportions of the villager's reality until evil, in the guise of the Devil and his monstrous minions, looms so large that it dominates the frame.

The new figures are at once familiar and grotesque, removed from the cultural structure that carefully maintained the proportions of good and evil.

The artisans who have been producing these figures have dealt with them in several ways. Some have become used to making them and have, to a certain extent, overcome their fears. In dealing with large quantities of them over the years they have come to regard the figures themselves as simply harmless toys, comic figures like the trickster-devils portrayed in the above-mentioned pastorelas. Much of the fear, however, has been merely repressed, and the majority of the artisans are living with a certain level of it. For their suspicious neighbors and their own consciences, they quote the following counsel of a sympathetic village priest: "We make only figures; nobody adores them as real devils. And it is much better to maintain oneself and one's family by making these figures than by stealing someone else's burro!"

Notes

1. Fieldwork in Ocumicho was conducted in 1974 and supported in part by a grant from the Center for Latin American Studies.
2. Vol. 153, no. 5 (May 1978): 648–50.
3. Pedro Carrasco, "Tarascan Folk Religion," in *Synoptic Studies of Mexican Culture*, ed. Robert Wauchope (New Orleans: Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, 1957), pp. 36–48.
4. Ibid., p. 46.
5. Rev. 17: 1–6.
6. Rev. 20: 1–10.

Plate 21-23. In the past few years, ceramic figures made by Tarascan Indians of Ocumicho, Mexico, have undergone a transformation. They have become more grotesque and more frightening to satisfy the tastes of foreign tourists. Local residents fear that the demonic figures risk attracting real demons.
Julius Stephen Kassovic discusses this confrontation between art and belief on pages 187-92.